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Declining cleavages and political choices: the interplay of social and political factors in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Many social scientists believe that in the Netherlands there has been a decline in the political impact of traditional class and religious divisions over the last quarter-century. In understanding the evolving political impact of social divisions it is important to recognise that political behaviour results from the interplay between social and political forces. In this paper we test empirically the interplay between the available political options and the social situation of voters. For this purpose we use Dutch election surveys from 1971 to 1998. Comparing changes in the importance of the two traditional divisions, we find a decline in the importance of social class that does not depend on political changes. On the other hand, the decline in religious-based voting seems to be affected by the merging of the three main denominational political parties into the Christian Democrats (CDA) as well as by a linear decline of the party loyalty of Catholics.

1. Introduction

Class and religion have historically been the dominant political divisions in Western Europe, class being pre-eminent in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia and religion dominating in France, Germany and the Netherlands. In many of these countries there has been a decline in the political impact of these traditional class and religious divisions over the last quarter-century (Franklin et al., 1992). A widespread assumption is that the changes reflect sociological processes such as secularisation and the growth of individualism. However, voting choices must surely result from

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interplay between social and political forces: voters' decisions will depend both on their own characteristics and on the nature of the political options that they face.[1] Changing party strategies could thus, in principle, also play a part in accounting for the decline in the traditional social divisions. In the present paper we explore these possible explanations, focusing on the Dutch case. The Netherlands is particularly appropriate both because there have been declines in the association between class, religion and vote over time and because there have also been political changes (De Graaf, 1996; Need, 1997; Nieuwbeerta, 1995). Our question is whether these political changes simply reflect the wider social processes or have played an autonomous role in accounting for the decline in the traditional divisions.

As we noted above, the decline of traditional divisions has usually been attributed to sociological processes like secularisation and the growth of individualism. Secularisation has involved a decline in the number of people attending church and a decline in the social significance of religious affiliation. The boundaries between the religious and the irreligious have, it is often assumed, become more blurred, and the social and cultural distinctiveness of religious groups as well as their normative force as reference groups has in consequence declined. This process of secularisation is considered to be especially strong in the Netherlands (Becker and Vink, 1994).[2] Similar processes may well have affected social classes: the working class has shrunk in size, and at the same time class solidarity has weakened, partly as a result of increased social and geographical mobility, rising living standards and expanding educational opportunities.

It is important to distinguish the above-mentioned process of changing size from that of blurring boundaries. By blurring boundaries we have in mind processes such as increased social interaction between members of different groups, or processes of cultural diffusion, which will reduce the distinctiveness of each group's values and sentiments. On the one hand, the declining size of the working class and falling numbers of church members has tended to reduce the share of the vote won by socialist or confessional parties. On the other hand, the blurring of boundaries and the reduction of social and cultural distinctiveness will tend to weaken the political impact of these social divisions. As members of religious groups become more like each other and like the non-religious in their culture and social relations, so they might be expected to become more similar in their political behaviour. In other words, it is not just the size of the confessional vote but also the association between religion and vote that will decline.[3] Research in the Netherlands, after taking into account the declining size of the confessional vote, shows that a decline in the association between religion and vote is indeed observed, irrespective of the kinds of data employed (Eisinga et al., 1996; De Graaf, 1996; Need, 1997).

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[1] In this paper we follow Mair's (1999) recent plea for a political sociology instead of a sociology of politics.

[2] For example, Need and De Graaf (1996) showed for the Netherlands, while controlling for various individual (background) characteristics, that those who live in a secularized social context are more likely to leave the church. Kelley and De Graaf (1997) showed a similar effect using data from 15 nations.

[3] van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983) labelled these processes unchurching and depillarization.

These accounts tend to take what might be termed a "sociological determinist" approach to the evolution of political cleavages. However, in understanding the evolving political impact of social divisions it is important to recognise that political behaviour results from the interplay between social and political forces. An actual voting choice will reflect the political options available to voters as well as their social situation. The same social structures could in theory yield quite different voting outcomes under different political constraints. The emergence of new political options, or the disappearance of old options, may well affect the relation between social structure and vote. Thus the emergence of the Green Left option in the Netherlands in 1989 may well have had an autonomous effect on the relation between class and vote. By appealing to environmentalists in a way that the old left parties did not, it may have well have attracted more middle-class, postmaterialist voters than did left-wing parties in the past.[4] By giving a distinctive voice to these postmaterialists it may also have led to a strengthening of their group identity and thus have increased the political awareness of this group. Conversely, by fragmenting left-wing appeals and reducing the emphasis on specifically class issues, it may also have tended to undermine class identity yet further.

Changes in the political options available may also have reduced the impact of religious division. The merging of the main Catholic, Protestant and Calvinist parties in 1977 into a shared party list and later into a single Christian Democratic party will have replaced specific linkages between denomination and party with a more diffuse relation (van Holsteyn and Irwin, 1988; Luykx and Rigthart, 1991; ten Napel, 1992; Verkuil, 1992; Pijnenburg, 1994). This could also have led to some blurring of the political choices. For example, to the committed Calvinist the choice of a general Christian party over its other rivals may not have been so clear-cut as the choice of a specifically Calvinist party.

In this way, then, the changes in the nature of the political options facing the electorate in the Netherlands may have had an immediate impact on the way that members of particular classes or religions voted. It is also possible that in the long run the presence or absence of a distinctive political voice may itself help to strengthen or reduce group solidarity. By fragmenting the working-class voice, and turning from specifically class appeals to more mixed left and environmentalist appeals, the Green Left may further reduce class solidarity and contribute to yet more blurring of class boundaries (cf. the arguments of Przeworski and Sprague, 1986). Similarly, the decline of specific linkages between parties and religious denominations may eventually accentuate the blurring of religious boundaries.

We can contrast this with the alternative view that the formation and dissolution of political parties are largely reflections of, rather than contributors towards, the underlying social processes. Thus the merger of the three specific religious parties

[4] For example, Kriesi (1989) showed that the new class of social and cultural specialists is more likely to support typical new social movements, which is typical for postmaterialists (Inglehart, 1990). Similarly, De Graaf and Steijn (1997) showed that the social and cultural specialists are more in favour of left-wing issues and even when one controls for age and education, are more likely to have postmaterialist values than any other class in the Netherlands.

into a common Christian one may have been a reaction to electoral weakness and to the prior dissolution of religious boundaries. Similarly, the emergence of the Green Left might have been a recognition of the prior fragmentation of working-class interests and of the prior emergence of new postmaterialist values (Inglehart, 1990).In this view parties are simply vote maximisers adapting to the changing ideological preferences of the voters. Certainly, if there are substantial barriers to entry for new parties into the political market place, as there are in the UK with its plurality system, then the political structure may be much less adaptive to the changes in the social structure. Plurality systems may thus show less tendency to respond to social change than do proportional representation systems such as in the Netherlands where the barriers to entry for new parties are much lower.

The central aim of this paper is to test whether political changes in the Netherlands affected voting behaviour. Specifically, has the formation of the CDA in 1977 and of the Green Left in 1989 led to any political realignment of the classes and religious groups or has the general trend towards the weakening of these class and religious divisions been unaffected by these political developments? First, however, we will elaborate on the social changes and specify related hypotheses. We will then discuss political changes, such as the formation of the CDA and the Green Left, and postulate hypotheses how this might have affected voting behaviour.

2. Social change in the Netherlands

Most Western European countries have seen more or less parallel changes in their occupational structures in the last quarter-century, with a contracting working class, rising unemployment, but an expanding service class. Similarly, most countries have seen secularisation in the sense of declining religious observance.

The Netherlands has been no exception to these general trends. The manual class has shrunk from being 45% of the working electorate in 1970 to 25% in 1998 (calculated on the basis of the Dutch Election Surveys of 1971 and 1998). Similarly, the proportion of the electorate who have a religion has fallen from 73% in 1971 to 53% in 1998 (also calculated on the basis of the Dutch Election Surveys of 1971 and 1998). The percentages of religious people are somewhat higher than from other representative surveys (cf. Becker et al., 1997). This is caused by the upper age limits of the other surveys.

We can think of these changes as “compositional” ones. That is to say, they are defined as changes in the sizes of the different class or religious categories. They may affect the total vote shares of the various class and religious parties, but they will not necessarily affect the strength of the association between class and vote, as measured by odds ratios—which are invariant with respect to the marginal totals. As we have argued earlier, we need to distinguish these compositional changes from changes in group solidarity and the blurring of group boundaries. These processes of blurring and societal homogenisation are often asserted but rarely measured. One useful measure is that of mobility rates, whether inter- or intra-generational, across group boundaries. An international study that included the Netherlands showed that

neither inflow nor outflow mobility blur the effect of the class cleavages (De Graaf et al., 1995).

With respect to religious groups of people, we would also expect an effect of outflow mobility, i.e. those who leave the church are more likely to cast a religious vote than second-generation non-church members. A study focusing on the Netherlands showed that indeed ex-members are more likely to vote for a confessional party than are second-generation non-members (Need, 1997). This will tend to affect the impact of religious boundaries.

What we expect from processes of blurring is that the groups in question will become less distinctive, culturally and socially, and that there will therefore be a convergence in their political preferences. This has often been termed a process of class or religious dealignment. What we expect to find, therefore, with respect to traditional voting is that

H1. The association between religion and party preference will become generally weaker. The odds ratios between religion and vote would therefore be expected to decline.

H2. The association between class and party preference will become generally weaker. The odds ratios between class and vote would therefore be expected to decline.

H3. Since social blurring can be expected to have a gradual character, we expect these to be continuing and gradual processes over time with no sharp discontinuities.

3. Political change in the Netherlands

The period that we are covering runs from 1971 to 1998. As we described earlier, this period has seen a number of changes in the party structure, for example with three religious parties merging together at the 1977 and subsequent elections and with four radical left-wing parties merging to form a single Green Left party from 1989 onwards. There have also been a number of other small parties that have fought only a few elections, emerging or disappearing during the period from 1971 to 1998.

In total there have been several parties that have won seats at one or more elections during our period, but we can in practice distinguish five major groupings, or blocs, which have a more or less continuous existence. We label these blocs the *old left*, the *green left*, the *new left*, the *religious right*, and the *free market right*.[5]

[5] This does not exhaust all the parties that have contested elections in our period, but because of the tiny numbers in our surveys, we have excluded the others.

The PvdA dominates the *old left*. This is a typical European Socialist Party, relatively strong in the working class, analogous to the SPD in Germany or the Labour Party in the UK. The old left has been a major political force throughout the 1970–1998 period, being a member of the government both at the beginning and end of this period. We also include in the socialist bloc two small parties (DS70 and the SP) which have had little electoral strength between 1970 and 1998 (DS70 contending elections only from 1971 to 1982; Mackie and Rose, 1991, p. 325), but which also drew on the working class for support. In addition, we include the Communist Party (CPN) until the 1986 elections, although this party merged with the Green Left from the 1989 elections onwards. The reason is that the CPN can best be considered as belonging to the old left, being a working-class party, until the 1986 elections.

The *new left* contains just one party, which as its name, Democrats 1966, implies was formed in 1966 on a platform of constitutional reform. It has contested all elections since then, although with varying fortunes. D'66 has evolved into a leftist/liberal party (van der Eijk and Niemöller, 1983, p. 7) with a continuing concern for constitutional issues, not unlike the Liberal Democrats in the UK. It has been part of coalition governments that have also included the PvdA but its more middle-class and highly educated electorate means that we need to distinguish it from the old left. Since D'66 came into existence before the first available election survey, we cannot test whether the rise of this party affected the importance of class divisions for voting behaviour.

Our third bloc consists of the *Green Left*. The Green Left was effectively formed in 1989 when four radical parties fought the election with a common party list. These four parties were the CPN (Communist Party), the PSP (Pacifist Socialist Party), the PPR (Radical Party) and the EVP (Evangelical People Party). These four parties had quite diverse and evolving histories, the CPN dating from 1936, the PSP from 1959, the PPR from 1971 and the EVP from 1981. Their electoral strength has always been weak and they have not usually, either before or after 1989, been in government. In addition, the "Federatieve Groenen" (Federative Greens) are included in the Green Left bloc, although they do not belong to the common party list of the above four parties.

Our fourth bloc of political parties consists of the *religious or confessional right*. Historically, there had been three main religious parties, the KVP, which drew its support mainly from Catholics, the ARP which drew its support mainly from members of the Calvinist churches and from other orthodox Protestants, and the CHU which drew its support mainly from members of the liberal Protestant churches. As van der Eijk and Niemöller have argued: "in terms of policy and in the eyes of the electorate these parties are very similar and are considered to occupy a centre-right position in Dutch parliamentary politics . . . internal Christian-democratic differences have always been minimal in relation to the differences of these parties vis-a-vis the other parties" (1983, p. 6). These three religious parties fought the 1977 election on a common slate and in 1980 they formally merged into the single party of the CDA. Ever since the introduction of universal suffrage, at least one of these Christian-democratic parties has been part of the governing coalitions, although this sequence

was finally broken in 1994. We should note that there are other confessional right-wing parties (SGP, GPV, RPF and RKPN) which did not join the CDA. These parties are much more conservative than the three main confessional parties (drawing votes mainly from Calvinists and orthodox Protestants) and receive much less support overall. There was little change in their support after the formation of the CDA.

Our fifth bloc consists of the *free-market right*. This bloc contains the VVD, the BP (farmers party) and the NMP (middle-class party). The BP fought elections from 1959 up to 1977, although with little success.[6] The NMP only contested elections during the 1970s. Both were right-wing parties. The main secular right-wing party, however, has been the VVD. It has usually been the main "third force" in Dutch politics, getting a substantial share of the vote but usually running well behind the PvdA and the CDA. It has often been a coalition partner of the Christian Democrats, although it is currently, and unusually, in government with the PvdA and D'66.

Since our interest is basically in the changing impact of the classical divisions on traditional voting, we will focus on the contrast between old left and free-market right, and on the contrast between the confessional right and all other parties.[7] Our hypotheses about the effect of political restructuring take a different form than does the sociological hypothesis of general and gradual class and religious dealignment. We expect to find, if political options have had any autonomous effect, that the changes in the relationship between social position and vote will be more time-specific and more group-specific. Thus we look for (a) changes in the association between religion and vote after the formation of the common Christian Democrat party list in 1977, and (b) changes in the association between class and vote after the formation of the common Green Left party list in 1989.

More specifically, for the CDA we postulate that the new CDA would have been less attractive to the specific religious sects/denominations than the individual parties had been before. At the same time, the CDA would have been more attractive to non-religious people than before since it was no longer (or less strongly) associated with specific sectarian connotations. As a result the association between religion and vote will be expected to decrease.[8] This would be a specific realignment rather than a general dealignment, since there is no reason to assume that the formation of the CDA would affect the choices of religious people between, say, the old left and the new left. Given this argument our fourth hypothesis is that:

[6] From 1977 to 1982 they participated in general elections as "Rechtse-Volkspartij" (People's Party of the Right).

[7] Of course, the impact of class and religion on the odds of voting for either New Left or Green Left is of interest in itself, but the limited number of cases makes it rather difficult to draw substantial conclusions about these chances. We therefore do not specify hypotheses about these cleavages.

[8] We should note that the small confessional parties (SGP, RPF, GPV, RKPN) which did not join the CDA might provide an exit option for the Calvinist voters. However, these small confessional parties have always had a very small electorate and hardly any change occurred in their support after the CDA came into existence. We therefore expect this particular exit option not to be substantially important when we investigate the changes in the odds of religious people voting for either the CDA or any of these small confessional parties.

H4. The odds of religious people voting for the religious right will show an abrupt decline after the 1977 election when the CDA came into existence.

This hypothesis is clearly different from our gradual change hypothesis (H3) based on the gradual process of social change.
We have less clear expectations with respect to elections after the formation of the Green Left party list in 1989. Two rival hypotheses can be put forward. First, middle-class postmaterialists, who had previously tended to vote for the old left, may have been likely to switch to the Green Left once the new party list was established. This suggests the hypothesis:

H5. The odds of middle-class voters supporting the old left, relative to working class voters, increases after the formation of the Green Left.

In effect, this process would be expected to increase the level of class voting. However the fact that the parties that formed the Green Left had been present as political actors prior to 1989 leads us to expect that the effect would at best be small. Alternatively, by providing a rival left-wing appeal to that of the PvdA and reducing the emphasis on specific class issues, the formation of the Green Left may have tended to undermine class identity. This leads to the rival hypothesis:

H6. The odds of working-class voters supporting the old left, relative to middle-class voters, decreases after the formation of the Green Left.

4. Data and results

To test our predictions we use eight Dutch National Election Studies over the period 1971–1998. These data can be obtained from the Steinmetz Archive in Amsterdam. The combined dataset contains 17,020 respondents. In these surveys our main variables are: the party voted for during the national election, the respondents' social class position and their denomination. For class position we apply the class scheme of Erikson et al. (1979) and distinguish the upper service class, lower service class, routine non-manuals, petty bourgeoisie, skilled and unskilled manual classes. Age and sex will be used as control variables. After dropping respondents who did not vote and other missing observations, 10.539 (i.e. 62%) of the original cases remain.

4.1. Test of religious cleavages

We begin, in Table 1, by reporting the results of models of confessional/non-confessional voting. We use logistic regression with a binary-dependent variable contrasting vote for confessional parties (coded 1) and all other parties (coded 0). In our first model, we include age, sex, denomination and dummy variables for each

Table 1
Parameter estimates (standard errors in parentheses) and model fit for confessional voting (N=10,539).[a] Dutch National Election Surveys 1971–1998

	Model A No trend	Model B Linear trend	Model C Interruption 1977	Model D Linear trend and 1977 interruption
Constant	*−2.75 (0.11)*	*−3.07 (0.14)*	*−3.31 (0.16)*	*−3.31 (0.16)*
Year (1971=ref)				
1972	*−0.25 (0.10)*	*−0.23 (0.10)*	*−0.26 (0.10)*	*−0.26 (0.10)*
1977	*−0.23 (0.10)*	−0.10 (0.10)	*0.43 (0.17)*	*0.37 (0.19)*
1981	−0.11 (0.09)	0.12 (0.11)	*0.56 (0.17)*	*0.52 (0.17)*
1982	*−0.57 (0.10)*	*−0.32 (0.12)*	0.10 (0.17)	0.06 (0.17)
1986	*−0.01 (0.10)*	0.33 (0.13)	*0.63 (0.17)*	*0.63 (0.17)*
1989	0.11 (0.10)	*0.51 (0.14)*	*0.75 (0.17)*	*0.76 (0.17)*
1994	*−0.51 (0.10)*	0.01 (0.16)	0.14 (0.17)	0.18 (0.18)
1998	*−0.77 (0.10)*	−0.11 (0.17)	−0.10 (0.17)	−0.01 (0.19)
Age	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)
Female	0.07 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
Denomination (none=ref)				
Catholic	*2.70 (0.07)*	*6.39 (0.62)*	*3.51 (0.16)*	*5.20 (0.76)*
Protestant	*1.99 (0.08)*	*2.02 (0.68)*	*2.33 (0.17)*	0.77 (0.87)
Calvinist	*4.30 (0.11)*	*8.14 (0.99)*	*5.32 (0.26)*	*6.39 (1.18)*
Other	*1.62 (0.12)*	*1.61 (0.12)*	*1.65 (0.12)*	*1.64 (0.12)*
Interaction: linear trend				
Year×Catholic		*−0.04 (0.01)*		*−0.02 (0.01)*
Year×Protestant		−0.00 (0.01)		0.02 (0.01)
Year×Calvinist		*−0.05 (0.01)*		−0.02 (0.02)
Interaction: interruption 1977 and later				
1977×Catholic			*−1.01 (0.17)*	*−0.66 (0.24)*
1977×Protestant			*−0.37 (0.18)*	*−0.67 (0.26)*
1977×Calvinist			*−1.27 (0.29)*	*−1.04 (0.39)*
Model fit				
Chi^2 (degrees of freedom)	3565 (14)	3631 (17)	3620 (17)	3642 (20)

[a] Significant at 5% level in italics.

year of interview. In this model A, we do not include linear trends or political changes.[9] This model results in a fit of 3,565 χ^2 against 14 df.

In our next model (model B) we include an interaction of each denominational category with year of survey (coded in years: 1971–1998). The purpose of the inter-

[9] One might argue that church attendance should be included in the analysis. People who frequently attend religious services are more integrated in their religious community and will therefore be more influenced by religious norms and values. Indeed, adding church attendance results in an improvement in fit and the effect is as expected. However, there are two reasons why we do not include church attendance. First, we are interested in trends and differences between denominations. We know that Calvinists frequently attend religious services and it is likely that they are more likely therefore to vote confessional than for example Catholics. By including church attendance denominational differences will be harder to detect. Second, when including church attendance one has to include a time trend for the impact

actions is that they allow for a linear decline in the importance of each denomination. It thus tests our general hypothesis that the association between denomination and confessional voting is suffering a continuous decline. This model results in a fit of 3631 χ^2 against 17 degrees of freedom. The three extra parameters for the trends result in an improvement in fit of 66 χ^2 compared to the baseline model A. Before discussing the parameter estimates of this model, however, we will first test several alternative models.

To test the political change hypothesis, holding that the merger of the three main religious parties into a single party in 1977 will lead to an abrupt decline in the association between denomination and vote, we model interactions between each denomination and a dichotomous variable indicating the year of political change (model C). These dummies have a score of 1 for 1977 and after, and 0 otherwise.[10] These replace the linear trend interactions of model B but use the same number of degrees of freedom as does model B. Model C results in a significant improvement in fit compared to our baseline model, i.e. 55 χ^2 against 3 degrees of freedom.

It is of course possible that there exists a linear decline in religious voting, as well as an abrupt decline after the merging of the three main religious parties. In model D we allow both kinds of interactions, and this results in a fit of 3642 χ^2 against 20 degrees of freedom. We therefore prefer model D, containing all interactions. In our final model (model E) we include all possible time interactions by multiplying each denomination by each possible year of survey, and take 1971 as the year of reference. The inclusion of all these interactions implies that the model allows for trendless fluctuations. This model consumes 38 degrees of freedom resulting in a fit of 3680 χ^2, which is a significant improvement at the 5% level compared to model D. Given the danger of over-fitting, we still prefer the more parsimonious model D.[11]

The parameter estimates of models A, B, C and D are presented in Table 1. The parameters first suggest that the 1986 and 1989 elections show relatively high support for the CDA, which is by some authors interpreted as a consequence of the popular former Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers (Anker, 1992). This is also known as the "Lubbers-effect". The main effects of denomination are as expected; compared to those without a denomination, Calvinists are most likely to vote for a confessional party; Protestants are least likely to vote on confessional lines; Catholics lie in between.

We now turn to the interactions between denomination and year of election. The sociological hypothesis suggested that the odds ratios measuring specific church party

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of church attendance as well. This will once more distract the attention from the importance of denomination. For similar reasons we do not include union membership in the analysis of class divisions for manual classes either.

[10] In fact, the three main confessional parties participated officially as a single party in the 1980 election. The fought the 1977 election on a common slate. However, taking the cutting point of 1980 did not change our results.

[11] Inspection of the parameter estimates of the complex model shows hardly any different result compared to model D. Furthermore, hardly any of the between-year differences are significant. We therefore draw the conclusion that the changes in the importance of denomination are not random. Also the BIC-statistic suggests that model D is to be preferred.

pairs will decline without discontinuity, which we have modelled with a linear trend. The estimates of Model D show that there is a significant linear decline only for the Catholics. Each year the odds that Catholics will vote for a confessional party fall by about 2.4% (Exp(−0.0236)).

The political hypothesis, in contrast, postulates an abrupt change after 1977, which we have modelled with a dichotomous term. The resulting interaction parameters suggest that the impact of the merger to form the CDA in 1977 had a significant effect on all three denominations. For Calvinists, Protestants and Catholics the interaction parameters are highly significant. In other words, after 1977 the odds of Calvinists casting a confessional vote fell to a third (Exp(−1.0362)) of their level before 1977, while the odds of Catholics and Protestants fell to about a half (Exp(−0.6605) and Exp(−0.6719)) respectively).

Our conclusion is therefore that the political merger in 1977 caused a change in the electoral behaviour of all three denominations, and especially for the Calvinists. However, some caution is required, since our analysis does not employ an experimental design. It is still logically possible that the Calvinists would have shown a similar substantial change in their voting behaviour, in the absence of the merger between the confessional parties. However, an effect of political change is in our view more plausible. Continuing on this line of reasoning, we conclude that social change has also been important, but less important than the political merger.

4.2. Test of class cleavages

Along similar lines we test hypotheses about the changes in class-based voting. These hypotheses concern the classical old left/free-market right contrast. Selection of those who voted either old left or free-market right implies that 3,574 respondents remain for analysis.

The baseline model with year of survey, class position, age and sex results in a fit of 584 χ^2 against 15 degrees of freedom. In our second model (model B) we allow for a linear trend for class voting. Since we distinguish six classes we model five trend interaction terms. We use the unskilled manual class as the reference category. These five interaction parameters result in an improvement of fit of 62 χ^2 compared to model A, which is clearly significant.

In model C we model our political change hypothesis, that the class effects will change abruptly after the introduction of the Green Left in 1989. For this purpose we multiply each class by a dichotomous variable indicating the elections before 1989 and after. The fit of this model (664 χ^2 against 20 df) is not, however, as good as the fit of the linear trend model B (670 χ^2 against 20 df). In model D we add a linear trend and the political interruption. This model gives an improvement in fit of 3 χ^2 against 5 degrees of freedom compared to model B. The parameter estimates of model D show that none of the parameters modelling the introduction of the Green Left in 1989 is significant. Apparently, the fragmentation of left-wing appeals after 1989 did not in itself undermine class voting.[12] Furthermore, a model allowing for

[12] Another possibility is that the formation of the CDA will have had an impact on class voting even though that of the Green Left did not. However, a specific test of this hypothesis failed to receive support.

each year a separate change in class voting does not result in an improvement in fit compared to model B. Therefore, our best-fitting model is model B, which allows for a linear decline in class voting.

The parameter estimates of model B in Table 2 show that compared to the unskilled manual class in 1971, the upper service class is least likely to vote for the old left, followed by the lower service class, the routine non-manual class and the petty bourgeoisie. There is no significant difference in class voting between the skilled and unskilled manual classes in 1971. Moreover, the non-significant time trend interaction with the skilled manual class implies that there is no difference in class voting between the skilled and unskilled manual classes in all election years.

There are, however, significant time trends for the other classes compared to the unskilled manual class. Each year the difference in class voting between the upper service class, the petty bourgeoisie, the lower service class and the routine non-manual class, compared to the unskilled non-manual class, becomes reduced. The decline is strongest for the upper service class. The decline for the lower service class and that for the routine non-manual class are almost identical. The decline is weakest for the petty bourgeoisie, although still significant. In other words, the interaction parameters of model B indicate that the class differences have declined over time, the service class, routine non-manual, petty bourgeoisie classes all becoming more similar to the working classes in their relative support for the old left and the free market right.

5. Conclusions

The results of our analyses, then, seem to suggest that a sociological explanation for the decline of class voting in the Netherlands is to be preferred, whereas a political explanation of the decline in confessional voting appears to have some force. The electoral behaviour of the Calvinists in particular seems to have been a response to the merger of their own party, the ARP, with the other confessional parties to form the CDA in 1977. In contrast, the results are consistent with the idea that the formation of the Green Left in 1989 was itself a response to social change.

We can get some idea of the substantive magnitude of these different processes. In the case of Catholics, we can calculate from the parameter estimates in Table 1 that the linear trend (which we interpret as measuring the social blurring) and the political interruption (that is the formation of the CDA) were almost equally important in contributing to the overall decline in their relative support for confessional parties. (Thus the parameter estimate for the interruption is -0.66 while the cumulative impact of the linear trend is $27\times-0.024=-0.65$ as measured on the logit scale.) For the Calvinists, more of the decline could be accounted for by the political interruption than by the social processes of blurring. (The parameter estimate for the political interruption is -0.67 while the cumulative impact of the linear trend was $27\times-0.015=-0.41$.) Finally, in the case of social class, Table 2 shows clearly that the social processes were more important than the political interruption in accounting for the extent of class dealignment. (For example, in the case of the upper

Table 2
Parameter estimates (standard errors in parentheses) and model fit for left-wing voting (N=4,145).[a] Dutch National Election Surveys 1971–1998

	Model A No trend	Model B Linear trend	Model C Interruption 1989	Model D Linear trend and 1989 interruption
Constant	*2.03 (0.18)*	*2.90 (0.27)*	*2.43 (0.21)*	*2.70 (0.29)*
Year (1971=ref)				
1972	*−0.63 (0.16)*	*−0.71 (0.20)*	*−0.64 (0.19)*	*−0.68 (0.20)*
1977	*−0.57 (0.15)*	*−0.62 (0.19)*	−0.27 (0.17)	*−0.45 (0.21)*
1981	*−0.52 (0.15)*	*−1.13 (0.20)*	*−0.56 (0.15)*	*−0.85 (0.27)*
1982	*−0.92 (0.14)*	*−1.54 (0.20)*	*−0.92 (0.15)*	*−1.23 (0.28)*
1986	*−0.33 (0.15)*	*−1.22 (0.24)*	*−0.35 (0.15)*	*−0.81 (0.36)*
1989	*−0.49 (0.16)*	*−1.51 (0.27)*	*−1.42 (0.24)*	*−1.55 (0.27)*
1994	*−1.00 (0.16)*	*−2.34 (0.32)*	*−1.97 (0.25)*	*−2.23 (0.32)*
1998	*−0.81 (0.15)*	*−2.39 (0.35)*	*−1.78 (0.24)*	*−2.17 (0.37)*
Age	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
Female	0.14 (0.08)	0.10 (0.08)	0.11 (0.08)	0.10 (0.08)
Social class (unskilled manl=ref)				
Upper service	*−2.08 (0.14)*	*−10.4 (1.44)*	*−2.73 (0.19)*	*−7.55 (2.48)*
Lower service	*−1.17 (0.12)*	*−7.23 (1.25)*	*−1.60 (0.15)*	*−4.68 (2.12)*
Routine non-manual	*−1.18 (0.12)*	*−7.19 (1.30)*	*−1.57 (0.15)*	*−4.54 (2.18)*
Petty bourgeoisie	*−2.40 (0.17)*	*−6.96 (1.72)*	*−2.67 (0.20)*	*−6.35 (2.70)*
Skilled manual	−0.03 (0.14)	−1.79 (1.46)	−0.22 (0.17)	1.07 (2.48)
Interaction: linear trend				
Year×Upper service		*0.10 (0.02)*		*0.06 (0.03)*
Year×Lower service		*0.07 (0.01)*		0.04 (0.03)
Year×Routine non-manual		*0.07 (0.02)*		0.04 (0.03)
Year×Petty bourgeoisie		*0.05 (0.02)*		0.05 (0.03)
Year×Skilled manual		0.02 (0.02)		−0.02 (0.03)
Interaction: interruption 1989 and later				
1989×Upper service			*1.62 (0.28)*	0.73 (0.53)
1989×Lower service			*1.19 (0.24)*	0.64 (0.45)
1989×Routine non-manual			*1.18 (0.25)*	0.66 (0.45)
1989×Petty bourgeoisie			0.65 (0.40)	−0.03 (0.65)
1989×Skilled manual			0.43 (0.29)	0.72 (0.53)
Model fit				
Chi^2 (degrees of freedom)	618 (15)	670 (20)	664 (20)	674 (25)

[a] Significant at 5% level in italics.

service class the estimate for the political interruption was 0.73 while the cumulative impact of the linear trend was 27×0.06=1.62.)

Why do we find these different results? On the sociological side we had no reason a priori to suppose that the sociological processes involved with religious secularisation were any different from those involved with the blurring of class boundaries. In practice, however, we find that linear trends in class voting are substantially larger than those for confessional voting. In this context, however, it is particularly important to recall the distinction between the compositional effect and the blurring of boundaries. In the case of both class and religion, it is the compositional change that is easiest to document, and of course in both cases there has been substantial change. Direct evidence on the blurring of boundaries, however, is rarely available and is usually inferred (as in the present case) rather than measured directly. But the possibility clearly remains that religion is better able to retain its significance as a source of identity among those who do belong to a church. Indeed, the existence of institutions such as churches may give religion a resilience that class lacks. Certainly, trade unions might perform a similar stabilizing role for class division, although of course in the modern world trade unions are no longer specifically working-class institutions.

On the political side it is difficult to argue why in principle one sort of merger should be consequential and another not. Why did the merger of the Green Left not have an effect whereas the merger of the religious parties did? One important possibility is that the Green Left, as a relatively small political actor, had relatively little weight in the party system as a whole whereas the CDA was a much bigger player. Thus the formation of the CDA will have been highly relevant to the great majority of religious voters whereas the formation of the Green Left may have been relevant only to postmaterialists rather than to left-wing voters as a whole. Another possibility here is that it did in fact have an effect but our sample size was not adequate to detect it. In models C and D of Table 2, for example, the parameter estimates for the 1989 interruption are quite substantial, but the standard errors are also large, given the small number of cases. The magnitude of the possible 1989 Green Left interruption might in fact be as large as that of the 1977 CDA interruption and we cannot reject the hypothesis that both interruptions had the same impact.

While we cannot give definitive answers as yet, we hope to have shown that our approach makes it in principle possible to explore the question whether political changes reflect wider social processes or have played an autonomous role in accounting for the decline in traditional divisions. Moreover, our results suggest that the role of political change should not be neglected and that a one-sided sociological determinism is not sufficient. Indeed, the political change such as the merger of the three confessional parties may itself have been a response to social change, in this case the declining number of church members (which we have termed the compositional change). But our argument is that these political responses have then played an autonomous role in reducing the association between religion and vote. This serves to emphasise once more the interplay between the sociological and the political. A thorough treatment of class or confessional voting must take explicit account of this interplay.

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